

Early Quakers in Mid Wales

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The First Quakers in Wales - accounts from Fox's Journal, and diverse other sources

"And there was a priest at Wrexham in Wales, one Morgan Lloyd, sent two of his preachers into the north to try us and see what manner of people we were, but they were both convinced by the power of the Lord and turned to Christ; and they stayed a time and went back again. One of them stands a fine minister of Christ to this day, one John ap John, but the other did not continue a Friend."
(The Journal of George Fox, p.172)

This meeting took place at Swarthmoor, on the 21st July 1653, and appears to mark the origin of Quakerism in Wales - although presumably word of the movement must have preceded Morgan Lloyd's decision, but of this we know little. Lloyd (also spelt Llwyd) followed a development that can be seen frequently in this era, of Puritan (in the late 1630's), becoming an itinerant preacher in the troubled 1640's, moving through Independent beliefs towards both Quakerism and Millenarianism in the 1650's. There is no record of his becoming a Quaker, however, and he features no more in this story.

The name of John ap John, however, recurs frequently, and in the words of Hercules Phillips, he "became the leading apostle of Quakerism in Wales, and he was the first Welsh Quaker to suffer for the truth." ('The Early Quakers in Wales', Hercules Phillips, 1912)

Previously an elder of the Independent Church at Wrexham, his is the first recorded name in Besse's Book of Sufferings for Wales, compiled in the early 18th century. Besse relates how John ap John, in 1655, asked a Swansea preacher if he was a "Minister of Christ". This appears to have touched a sore spot (one suspects it must have been the way he asked it!) as it apparently "gave great offence", and led to the priest "instantly seizing John by the collar, and without suffering him to speak another Word, dragging him out and delivering him to a Constable, who confined him that Night in a close dark Prison." The next day he was before a magistrate, where the priest urged that he be whipped. This does not appear to have taken place, though he was gaoled until the next Great Sessions.

Mardy Rees (The Quakers in Wales, 1925) argues that John ap John was imprisoned even earlier than this, in 1654, as this is claimed by another great early Welsh Quaker, Thomas Holme. Holme wrote to Fox in (according to Fox) 1654, stating that there had been "a great convincement in Radnorshire" following Holme's ministry there, and that John ap John was in prison at Cardiff. Richard Davies, another Quaker, from Welshpool, says of the same "I suppose he might be prisoner there in 1653 or 1654" (quoted by Rees). The former date seems unlikely, in view of the established date of his visit to Swarthmoor; but at all events,

it is clear that John ap John threw himself headlong into the cause, and was not afraid to confront authority. Despite his early forays into Radnorshire, Holme's main area was South Wales.

I have found no account of John's doings in 1656, but in 1657 he is with Fox and Holme in the market town of Brecon. There, John ap John was busy with his rousing speeches, which seem to have backfired somewhat, to judge by Fox's account:

"John ap John .. was moved of the Lord to speak in the streets. And I had walked out a little into the fields, but by the time I came in all the town was up in an uproar; and when I came in to the inn the chamber was full of people and they were speaking in Welsh...Towards the night the magistrates gathered together in the street, and a multitude of people, and they bid them shout and gathered up the town so that for about two hours there was such a noise as the like we had not heard...There was never such an uproar amongst Diana's handicraftsmen as there was at that time."
(Journal, p.291)

The gripping story continues with an account of the lady of the inn trying to evict her controversial guests, without success. As Fox observes "... the Lord prevented their mischief for they had an intent to have murdered us." (p.291)

It is worth stepping back, perhaps, and asking **why** did such people arouse such violent hostility? It is hard to imagine the common people being so aghast at what amounts (again, judging from the Journal) to lofty puritan exhortations and some spiritual healing. Christopher Hill is surely right when he suggests that it was the political dimension, not the theological one, that upset the Gentry and their agents the clergy, the magistrates, and the constables, so much. At this time (1653), Fox was uttering the likes of

"O ye great men and rich men of the earth! Weep and howl for your misery that is coming...The fire is kindled, and the day of the Lord is appearing, a day of howling...All the loftiness of men must be laid low" (Fox, from 'Gospel Truth Demonstrated') It is perhaps surprising we are not known as Howlers.

This is very different stuff from the Journal, which was dictated with calming benefit of hindsight in 1675; early Quakerism (especially before the Peace Testimony) was undoubtedly threatening and must have been difficult, at the time, to distinguish from the outright sedition of the Ranters, at least to their opponents. Many early Quakers leaders were from the New Model Army, and would have been seen to be well placed for organised violence. Even Fox, as late as 1657, was exhorting members of the Army "on to conquer Rome". Their constant attacks on tithes, hireling priests and the sanctity of ecclesiastical buildings, coupled with their sheer rudeness (as it would have appeared) in matters of social

convention, must have made it easy for priests to whip up the sort of frenzy evidently witnessed in Brecon.

Following the Brecon debacle, Fox and his supporters moved north, eventually coming into Radnorshire. A very large meeting seems to have gathered, on Penybont Common; Fox asked John ap John to address them in Welsh. One Morgan Watkins (the first, perhaps, of the many Watkins who were sympathetic to Quakerism) alerted Fox to the fact that Gentry and Clergy were present: Fox took the stage.

And so I passed up to the meeting and stood a-top of a chair about three hours..., and stood a pretty while before I began to speak, and many people sat a-horseback. And at last I felt the power of the Lord went over them all and the Lord's everlasting life and truth shined over all....And many were turned that day to the Lord Jesus Christ and his free teaching, and all were bowed down under the power of God and parted peaceably and quietly with great satisfaction.....A priest and his wife...made no objection...and said they never heard such a sermon in their lives, and the Scriptures so opened."
(Journal, p.294)

This meeting, even by Fox's own standards, appears to have stood out as something special.

Meanwhile, John ap John continued his mission, and 1658 sees him in gaol again, this time in Welshpool. 1660 saw the Restoration of the monarchy, and increased persecution of Quakers; further imprisonment and fines followed, as he and Richard Davies continued to tour in the ministry, Davies preaching in English, and John ap John in Welsh. Their hardships are recorded in Besse, and also in Richard Davies' extensive diary.

In 1681 John ap John together with Thomas Wynne of Caersws, bought 5000 acres of land from William Penn, and was henceforth an enthusiastic supporter of Penn's 'Holy Experiment'. He himself never emigrated, but sold land on to others, and continued to support the ever-diminishing home cause towards the end of the 17th century. John ap John died in 1697. (For further details of his life see 'John ap John and early records of Friends in Wales, by William Norris, Journal Supplement No.6, and Mardy Rees, op. cit. For Thomas Wynne, see 'Thomas Wynne, Crynwyr, Heddychwyr a Chyfaill William Penn' by Geraint Jenkins)

A figure more specifically associated with Mid-Wales is Richard Davies, of Welshpool (1635 - 1708). His background was Anglican, but at the age of 17, he came under the influence of that remarkable Welsh Independent preacher, Vavasour Powell - as did so many of the early Welsh Quakers. Davies first heard of Quakers in around 1656 from Independent preachers, who denounced the wayward sect as Christ-denying. In 1657 (that date again) a lowly Quaker from South Wales called Morgan Evan visited the house of Davies' master, one Evan Jones, a felt maker in Llanfair Caereinion. Davies was extremely impressed by Morgan Evan, and after a second visit, he became convinced.

Davies' own account of the tribulations of becoming a Quaker is interesting: again, it is not the theology but the sociology that offended others. Specifically, the use of "thee" and "thou" caused him trouble. His master, it appears, understood his intentions, but his master's wife "flew into a passion and struck him severely on the head with a stick, and swore that she would kill him, though she should be hanged for it".

Around Christmas time he heard John ap John preaching in Shrewsbury, and that appears to have sealed his fate. His parents, however, did not approve of the deviant behaviour of their head-strong 22 year old. He received beatings from his father, and eventual expulsion.

He moved to London the following year, where he was greatly impressed by the ministry of a young lady at Horsleydown Meeting, against the excesses of the Ranters. His proposal of marriage was accepted and they returned to Montgomeryshire.

In 1659 Richard Davies visited his close friend Cadwaladr Edwards to try and persuade him of the Quaker faith (Edwards was an Independent), and in this he was successful - with profound results, as we shall see.

With the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 came greatly increased persecution; however, now it was not only Quakers but also the Independents that had previously denounced him that were suffering. Davies was imprisoned in Montgomery gaol, three days after the birth of his first child. In prison, he appears to have spent his time convincing other non-conformists of Quaker principles.

Perhaps as a result of his early imprisonment himself, Richard Davies went on to become renowned for his skill in securing the release of imprisoned Quakers (although not always avoiding further imprisonment himself!). To this end he developed acquaintances amongst the high and mighty, and a sound knowledge of the law; he also became well-known and liked at London Yearly Meeting. At some point in the 1660s he acquired Cloddiau Cochion, a farmhouse which was to become a Quaker stronghold in the years to come. But he continued to travel widely (even when nominally a prisoner), visiting, comforting and seeking the release of Quaker prisoners. He died in 1708, and was buried at Clodiau Cochion.

In an interesting article on Quakerism in Montgomeryshire, Ronald Morris observes that the last years of the Commonwealth and thereafter saw an increasing disarray amongst the non-conformist world. Disputes became ever more bitter and arcane, proponents of one view being more eager to pour scorn on their opponents than to demonstrate anything resembling Christian charity. In this climate, suggests Morris, the purity and simplicity of the Quaker message found open ears. It was certainly heard in some apparently unlikely quarters: it was largely thanks the ministry of Richard Davies and Cadwaladr Edwards, that a socially significant conviction was made: that of Charles Lloyd of Dolobran.

Edwards was persuaded by Davies to hold a Meeting in his house at some point in 1659; to this Meeting came the local gentry, Charles Lloyd. Lloyd (1637 - 1698) of Dolobran Hall was commissioner of the peace, and although only in his early twenties, was High Sheriff elect. His ancestry can be traced back to the Welsh monarchy of the middle ages, and his family had lived at Dolobran Hall since 1300.

His conviction, described by Richard Davies in his autobiography, was bound to have a significant impact on Quakerism in Montgomeryshire, and especially in the region around Meifod. Influenced by Quaker ideas whilst at Oxford, his attendance at the house of Cadwaladr Edwards was followed the next day by a Meeting in his own home Dolobran Hall; most of the families of the parish sooner or later followed him.

It may well be imagined that this did not go down well with Randolph Davies, rector of Meifod, who complained at the loss of most of his flock, including even his wife's sister. A story goes that the two sisters would cross each others' path on Sunday morning, on their way to their respective places of worship. According to Mardy Rees:

"If you had grace, my dear sister", said the Rector's wife, "you would come with me." The other sister answered, "If *thou* hadst grace *thou* woudst come with me."

One aspect of the significance of Lloyd's conviction was financial; he owned an iron forge which gave employment to many Quakers. However, his wealth and social status did not render him immune from persecution, possibly quite the opposite. Within a short time he was summoned, and upon failure to take the oath of Allegiance and Supremacy, was committed to gaol. Despite conditions that appear harsher even than normal, his newly wed wife Elizabeth (nee Lort) voluntarily elected to join him at Welshpool Prison as soon as their first child, also Charles, was born. Along with them went Hugh and Richard David, Cadwaladr Edwards, Anne Lawrence and Sarah Wilson. Tragically, Elizabeth died soon after the birth in prison of their second child, Sampson.

But there was still grief to come for the gentry who dared to step out of line. Charles had a younger brother Thomas, also an Oxford scholar, who returned on hearing the grievous news; he soon also adopted the Quaker faith. For a considerable time he escaped persecution, perhaps because, as a doctor, he was too valuable to the community to lock up. But the heavy hand of the law fell in due course. It is a measure of the sheer vindictiveness of the authorities that Thomas Lloyd was seized as he left his own wedding! But he was a man of enormous moral strength; with friends in position of power, he negotiated hard for the release of his brother; Charles, however, refused to accept it till all were released ahead of him.

Lloyd's own incarceration lasted an incredible ten years. During this time he was visited by George Fox in 1667, which was a great comfort. His eventual release in

1672 (thanks largely to the Declaration of Indulgence) was a sad homecoming: his dear wife was dead, Dolobran Hall was totally vandalised, and his livestock had long been seized.

In 1680 the Lloyds received a visit from the Bishop of St. Asaph. In a series of marathon debates, the Lloyd brothers did theological battle with the Bishop, who was much impressed. A period of leniency followed, with all those imprisoned being released. Ironically, this same Bishop Lloyd later found himself imprisoned in the Tower of London - where he received a sympathetic visit from the ever-loving and forgiving Richard Davies.

Understandably, his family had moved away; they found lucrative business in the Birmingham area, again in the metal business. Charles Lloyd died in Birmingham in 1698. Sampson Lloyd, financially boyed by his successful nail factory, went on to found a bank - whose name still adorns most towns today. He also largely funded the invention of railway.

For Thomas Lloyd, wider horizons beckoned: in 1683 William Penn had asked him to come over to America and assist him in the development of the new colony - more of this later.

Charles Lloyd junior, guided by the ever-present Richard Davies, now assumed the mantle of Quaker leader, and it was under him that the first ever Meeting House in Wales was built.

Dolobran Meeting House was built in 1701, of brick, with a house attached, and a burial ground of some 500 square yards. Charles Lloyd paid the largest part of its cost, with substantial contributions from Richard Davies and others. Funds were tight, however, and it was not glazed until 40 years later, in 1742. Records would indicate that the next re-glazing was in 1958!

The Meeting House was adjoined by a little cottage, and in the year of its opening, one John Kelsall was appointed as schoolmaster. The school flourished, with over 50 pupils at one point - surely one of the earliest signs of the commitment of Welsh Quakers to education.

Charles Lloyd the younger did not, however, enjoy the financial success of his brother Sampson. Attempting to run an iron foundry in rural Montgomeryshire, he failed financially, became bankrupt, and was summarily disowned. The Dolobran estate, sadly depleted, passed to his son James, who sold it in 1780. The Meeting House closed with it.

In the intervening years, however, Dolobran had become the focal point for Quakers in the northern part of Mid Wales, forming a focus for Meeting Houses at Llanwddyn, Llangurig and Esgair Goch. Additionally, there were Meetings in at least 20 other towns and villages, most notably at Llanidloes and Clodiau Cochion - a sign of the widespread nature of Quakerism at this time. Although Dolobran was closed as a Meeting House in 1780, it survived 180 years as a cattle shed,

only to be re-discovered by George Edwards in 1955, who persuaded the then-owner (who else but Sampson Lloyd!) to lease the building back to Friends. In the summer of 1957, Meetings for Worship were re-established, which now (1993) continue on an occasional basis.

Further south and west, we encounter rural Wales at its deepest. In view of the established wisdom that Quakerism in the 17th century was an urban phenomenon, (a challengeable claim, I reckon), it is strange to see it so strong in the south-western tip of Montgomeryshire. The only town in this remote region is Llanidloes, bolstered by the villages of Llandinam, Llangurig, Trefeglwys and Carno. And yet, we have, from early days, a vibrant record of Quaker activity.

Morris suggests an interesting sociological reason for this: the more powerful gentry during the Civil War were, in Wales staunchly Royalist. The Lesser gentry, he suggests, were the more inclined to radical views. An equally impelling view is that Vavasour Powell had laid such fertile ground that the vector of change from established church, through Independent or Baptist, to Quaker, was a natural progression. At any rate, Llanidloes and its environs does seem to have contributed more than its fair share of dissidents: prominent sufferers being John Roberts, John Griffiths, Lewis Jerman, David Owen, and John and Thomas Potts. Meetings were held in many farmhouses, but also in the splendid Market Hall that sits so conspicuously in the centre of Llanidloes, now defying traffic as it once defied the established wisdom of a previous age.

Returning to Radnorshire, we find that Quakerism here continued to flourish after Fox's visit in 1657, (he visited again in 1663 and 1667 or 8) though persecution, and perhaps the sparse nature of its population, meant that Meetings were held in farmhouses in the 17th century. Records are abundant though scattered, and would warrant detailed study. Suffice here to say that centres included Presteigne, New Radnor, Rhayader, and Llandegley.

The need for permanent Meeting Houses may not have been great, but before long the need for a burial ground was. Clearly Friends could not be buried 'at the steeple house', yet some provision had to be made. Initially, burials were done on peoples' own land, or that of other Friends; but increasingly the need was felt for a burial ground. In Radnorshire this need was met by the acquisition of a quarter of an acre of ground in the hills above Llandegley, on the 17th of 6th month, 1673, at a place soon to be known as the Pales.

Leased for a thousand years from David Powell the elder and David Powell the younger, it shows us that Quakerism must have been something of a force in Radnorshire at that time. The first trustees were John Lewis of Glascwm, Robert Watkins of Llanfihangel Rhydithon (any relation of Morgan Watkins, that spoke with Fox on his first visit?), and two brothers from Llanbister, Edward and Richard Moore.

There has been speculation over the name "Pales", and whether it means "an enclosure", (as in English) or "the place with an outcrop of rock" (as in the Welsh word "palis"). The first deed, of 1673, assigns it two 'names': "a burial ground

called Roundabout", and "Y Ty ar dir yn y Swydd" ("the house on the land at the Swydd"). The deed states it is "to remain as a burial ground". These details suggest that the ground was already, in 1673, in use as a burial ground, and furthermore that there was at least some sort of building present then.

In 1694, a second deed, altering the names of the trustees to include Roger Hughes of Llanfihangel Rhydithon, Nathan Woodliff of Cregrina, and Peter Edwards of Bleddfach (now Bleddfa) refers to it as "one parcell of land paled or fenced in round about". This, I suggest, clinches the meaning of Pales as an enclosure, and elucidates the meaning of "roundabout" in the original lease. Furthermore, a Welsh dictionary in my possession published in 1861 gives an additional meaning for the word palis as "wainscot", which from the early 17th century denoted a wooden enclosure.

We have no specific records of Meetings as such at the Pales in the 17th century, but certainly, the persecution in Radnorshire continued, as Besse records for us vividly, with swingeing fines, and frequent illegal imprisonment. Evan David, John Evans and John Lloyd were all imprisoned in 1679 for refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance. In a more dramatic event in February, 1683, a Monthly Meeting somewhere in the parish of Llandegley (possibly at Pales) was interrupted by John Davies, High Sheriff. The sheriff, it appears, wanted them to go with him immediately, whereas his deputy and constable "forbore laying hands on them till the conclusion of their Meeting". This enraged the sheriff, but what tipped him over the edge was that, seeing he had no warrant, Friends questioned his authority. At this, Friends were dragged out and locked up in an alehouse, whilst the Sheriff rode off to get Edward Davies (to whom he was related), the JP. Held overnight in bitter conditions, a number of Friends were marched over the "bleak hills" to the nearest prison, probably Presteigne, a good walk away. They were John Lloyd, Hugh Lloyd, Edward Jones, Roger Hughes (a trustee of the Pales), Henry Cleaton, Anne Cleaton, Mary Cleaton, and Amy Phillips. Note that three to receive this harsh treatment were women.

Biographical details of these stalwarts are scant or non-existent, but certain names appear again and again, and Watkins, Lloyd, Hughes and Cleaton are still common names in Radnorshire today. The Hughes of Llanfihangel Rhydithon, for example, turn up again as trustees of a burial plot at Llanoley donated by the Woodliffes of Cregrina, being a "square piece of land that is and for more than 20 years has been enclosed, fenced or paled....Said piece since the enclosure has been a place wherein the people called Quakers have buried their dead". Further evidence that paling of ground for burial purposes predated its legal acquisition.

Edward Jones was clearly not put off by his spell in jail, either, for in 1716 he and his fellows from Llanfihangel Rhydithon, the Hughes', became trustees at Pales of the "dwelling house with all the houses and outhouses, garden and woods growing at the lower end of the dwelling house, and the ground 'prickt or marked' out by John Phillips (the benefactor), with a piece part of close called Kay yr Pales". (Cae, Welsh for enclosed field). Access to a well was guaranteed also. Clearly by now, the Pales was a substantial going concern. However, in some ways, the early days of Quakers in Wales had already come to an end.

William Penn and the End of the Early Days

Much has been written about William Penn, who was born in London in 1644. The family name, apparently, derives from the Welsh word 'pen', meaning the top of a hill; it was chosen by William Penn's grandfather on his removal from Wales.

William Penn had embraced the Quaker faith as a student at Oxford. It was also at Oxford that he first dreamed up the idea, at the age of 17, of a Quaker colony in the New World:

"This I can say that I had an opening of joy as to these things (the American Colonies) in the year 1661 at Oxford twenty years since."
(Quoted in 'The Quakers in Pennsylvania', by Isaac Sharpless)

He was singularly well placed to realise his 'opening' - he had strong connections at court, being a personal friend of the then Duke of York, later James the Second. Moreover, he had an outstanding claim against the crown for £16,000, due for his father's estate. This he exchanged for what is now Pennsylvania and Delaware, in 1681.

Almost immediately, Quakers from Wales bought land and emigrated - the 20 years or more of oppression since the Restoration had taken their toll, and the Act of Toleration was still an unknown eight years hence. Furthermore, Penn had set 30,000 acres of this new land aside as "the Welsh Barony". He wanted to call it New Wales, but was over-ruled, by royal decree, in favour of Pennsylvania - Pencoed would have been more acceptable.

The history of Pennsylvania reads like the geography of Wales: Merion, Radnor, Haverford, and so on. But the links are even closer: for the building of the first permanent Meeting House in the Welsh township of Radnor, Pennsylvania, was in 1717 - very close to the date of the Meeting House at Pales, in the original Radnorshire. Both survive to this day, though only the Welsh one is still in use as a Quaker Meeting.

By a strange coincidence, we have another vista onto the world of 1717: the diary of Thomas Story.

Thomas Story was a Quaker traveller, and in that year was travelling throughout Wales. Arriving from Ireland at Parkgate, on the 'Chester River', he proceeded to travel through Wales towards Yearly Meeting at Bristol. His diary is like a synopsis of the whole story: he stays with Sarah Lloyd, wife of Charles Lloyd (the younger) of "Delobran", then on to "New Town", then "Lanneedles", and finally, New Radnor.

Bearing in mind the calm reception accorded to Fox in Radnorshire (as compared to Brecknock, for example), Story's experience of Radnor is interesting:

On the 20th I sent to appoint a Meeting at Radnor, where the Yearly Meeting was to be the week following, in the place intended for it; which was in a barn belonging to the Priest of the Parish, which he had granted to Friends for that Service: a rare Instance of Condescension in a Man of his Function! But being a moderate, good-natured Man, when they made their request, he said, "since we preach CHRIST, and endeavoured to reform the people, and aimed at the Honour of GOD, he could not refuse it, though he expected censure for it from his own people" (A Journal of the Life etc. of Thomas Story, 1747)

Magistrates were, it seems, very willing to provide accommodation, letting the Town Hall, despite "the people being raw and a little rude, especially the meaner sort". Sadly, Story gives no hint of the work afoot at the Pales.

Ironically, by the time the Pales was erected, Quakerism in Mid Wales was already severely in decline, due to the extreme numbers of emigrations. The response of the Society to this threat appears to have been a rather unhealthy, inward-looking self-sufficiency. The bulk of the 18th century, and the first half of the 19th, appear to be the Dark Age of Welsh Quakerism (although detailed research may prove otherwise!) On the surface, it appears that it is not until the evangelical revival of the latter half of the 19th century that we see Quakerism in Mid Wales flourishing again - though its nature then was much changed. A final flavour, perhaps, of the thinking of early Friends in Wales is given in the beautiful (if eccentrically spelt!) prose of John ap John, reminiscing on his first meeting with George Fox:

The 21 day of the 5 month, 1673. This tim 20 years Agooe was ye tim that J John Ap John was At Swart Moore with Gorge ffoox, in Lankashire.

Yt was ye ffrst tim yt J soa Go ffox. Now in this 20 years i have Reseved mvche & don bvt lily; & it was thee, O Lord, yt was my hvphwldar (upholder) all this 20 years. J never Lost ye ffeeling of thy power since then in swartmore J reseved it & ffelt it; & i blive i nevr shall lose it if i waet for it & fear thee, & if thy ffeare be bebiffor my Ei. This ffeare will keepe me ffrom ofending agenst thee, ye god of my liff.

Ye 9 of ye 6 Month, 1673, were thes things seriously Considered and pondred vpon, how ye lord hath byn Deling with me & many more this 20 years, & upwards.

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Martin Williams
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